

NEW YORK TIMES: With Uncertainty Filling the Air, 9/11 Health Risks Are Debated

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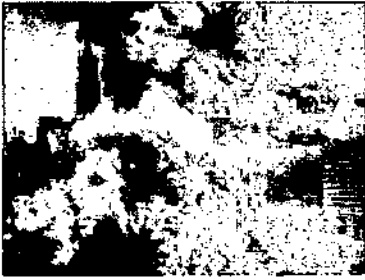
By **KIRK JOHNSON**

Five-year-old Phoebe Kaufman's room was once filled with her artwork. Now all that remains is a single picture of a flower, which hangs by her bed. Her parents threw out everything else because paper is porous and might have absorbed dust from the collapsing World Trade Center towers that blasted into their Lower Manhattan apartment through an open window.

No one knows whether Phoebe's artwork had become dangerous, and air tests done in that apartment building, about a block from ground zero, have shown the air to be safe. But decisions still had to be made, so everything absorbent — stuffed animals, mattresses, coats — went into the trash.

It's the floor that has the family in a quandary now. The family's insurance company said it would pay to have their old wooden floor refinished, but that idea was shot down by their pediatrician, who said that the trade center dust, perhaps containing asbestos or other hazardous materials, was deep in the floor's cracks and that sanding would throw it back into the air.

"It's such a uniquely American thing to think that science can provide an objective truth, but no one has an answer to these kinds of questions," said Phoebe's mother, Elizabeth Berger. "There's no one to turn to."



Edward Keating/The New York Times

It is difficult to gauge the lingering effects of dust and smoke that seeped into nearby residents' homes after the attack on the World Trade Center, environmental experts say.

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Ting-Li Wang/The New York Times

Alan De Klerk and his wife plan to send their daughter, Madison, 7, back to Public School 89 when it reopens.



Bob Rives for The New York Times

Dr. Stephen Gavett, left, and Dr. Dan Costa, working in an E.P.A. laboratory in North Carolina on Thursday, examined the effects of dust from the trade center collapse on mice.

Community leaders in Lower Manhattan have estimated that about 75 percent of the roughly 20,000 people who lived within a half mile of the trade center have returned to their homes since the Sept. 11 disaster. And all of them are facing the same series of questions and choices about how to live in this altered place and how to assess the environmental risks that the proximity to a disaster site and cleanup project may entail.

This being New York, the diversity of conclusions is boundless. Some people see downtown as a toxic nightmare, a kind of Manhattan Love Canal that has permanently poisoned the area's buildings and apartments with asbestos or chemicals. Others believe the risks are overblown or nonexistent.

But in another way, many residents say, the diversity of views reflects

the deeper problem they face: no answer seems certain, scientifically airtight, or obvious. Because there has been little government testing of apartments for air quality — and some tests conducted months ago have still not been published — there is no public body of facts, no set of numbers that can bestow a feeling of certainty. Some building owners have had their properties privately tested; others have not. And every test that is done becomes ammunition for one side or another — those who see great risk and those who do not. How to clean an apartment or an office that was contaminated, how to know when it is clean enough, whether to pay for expensive tests or filters, whether to worry about how well the neighbors cleaned their apartments and rooftops, are all questions that have for the most part been left to individual tenants, owners and workers.

"People have essentially been left to their own devices," said Representative Jerrold Nadler, a Democrat from Manhattan who represents downtown, and who believes that what he calls the microclimates of downtown — the homes and offices, the personal spaces and lives of residents and workers — have been mostly neglected in the disaster response.

But New Yorkers have not waited for science and government to catch up. In the same energetic, impatient ways that have always shaped the city's character, they have simply gotten on with things.

Beth Kaltman, 22, a model, cleaned her own apartment using paper towels. So did Dr. Jessica Leighton, an assistant commissioner of risk and environmental communication at the New York City Department of Health.

Noreen Hennessy and her husband, Elliot Freeman, who live on Warren Street, a few blocks from the disaster site, hired professional cleaners. In the converted factory building on Broadway where Phoebe Kaufman and her family live, some people ripped up their floors. Some mopped up and vacuumed, and others never came back.

Phoebe's father, Frederick Kaufman, installed filters to cover the air ducts that connect to the rest of the building, working on the theory that dirtier air from other apartments or common areas of the building could infiltrate. He cannot say that this, like throwing away Phoebe's artwork, was a necessary step; he also cannot say, when it comes to the health of his daughter and his son, Julian, 2, that it was not necessary, either.

"You can no longer say this is a rational response, or this is an emotional response; you just have to say, this is what I have to do to feel safe," he said. And without conclusive data, people also have little basis of defending the decisions they do make, he said.

"Anybody doing more cleaning than I is a fanatic, and anybody doing less is crazy," he said.

Measuring the Impact

In the frantic hours after the attack on Sept. 11, as the smoke still billowed from the disaster site with a plume that would be tracked hundreds of miles at sea, responsibility for assessing the environmental impact was carved up, mainly because the job seemed too big for any one government entity to handle alone.

The federal Environmental Protection Agency took the lead responsibility for the air in public spaces — sidewalks and streets. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration was in charge at ground zero. The New York City Departments of Health and Environmental Protection would take on the questions of building safety. Testing and monitoring began almost immediately — what would grow in the ensuing months to become a sprawling database measuring everything from chromium, PCB's and lead to asbestos, silica and benzene.

And so, too, began what many health researchers now say was a huge political blunder. Officials from the E.P.A. and the city made broad pronouncements that the air downtown was safe to breathe, and not much of a long-term health concern outside the immediate perimeter of the disaster. Although those conclusions have not been disproved by the thousands of tests conducted since then — more than 10,000 air samples by the E.P.A. — the second-guessing and suspicions began almost immediately among many residents, and later physicians, that the tests were inadequate, or partial, or that the many things that could not be known about the air impact were being minimized, resulting in a cloud of mistrust and uncertainty that has still not gone away.

"I have the concern that the initial reassurances were based on the desire to move ahead as quickly as possible — that reassurances were given because it supported public policy," said Dr. Stephen M. Levin, the medical director at the Mount Sinai-Irving J. Selikoff Center for Occupational and Environmental Medicine at the Mount Sinai School of Medicine, who has seen dozens of cases of respiratory ailments related to the trade center disaster.

What ensued, in part, was a war of data and interpretation. The E.P.A., in testing for things like asbestos or other particles in the air, used a 24-hour-averaging system, which was considered the scientific standard for gauging exposures. But that system was attacked because it flattened the periodic spikes that were being recorded as dust and

smoke drifted around the area

The E.P.A. also focused on small particles, based on the scientific literature that said they were the greatest concern. That emphasis failed to reflect the larger particles that physicians and scientists say were causing widespread misery and worry — from sore throats to red eyes — across wide swaths of Lower Manhattan.

The size of the asbestos fibers that the government was measuring also became part of the battle. The E.P.A. scientists said that the larger particles they were testing for — and which were showing up in relatively few numbers — were the most dangerous because their shape allowed them to be lodged in the lungs, while smaller particles would get sloughed off by the body. Critics said that smaller particles were being deliberately overlooked. Some private tests showed concentrations of the tiniest asbestos fibers — less than five microns in size — that were in some cases four times above the government's safety threshold.

But one of the biggest questions raised by the government's critics was that the government's air program was missing much of the world that people really inhabited — the spaces inside apartments and office buildings, which had mostly been left to individual building owners and managers. There was no government database, no handy list of indoor air monitors to pull down from a Web site.

The Natural Resources Defense Council, whose headquarters are in Manhattan, plans to release a study next week concluding that the government response, while heroic on many levels, broke down when it came to the environment, especially the issues that affected local residents who faced daunting and often unanswerable questions about their health as the cleanup and recovery proceeded.

Because no one government agency was in charge of the overall environmental impact, the report says, issues of residential indoor air quality fell between the cracks, and because of the emphasis on long-term risks, the impact on susceptible populations was not emphasized enough.

"The residents of Lower Manhattan have to some extent gotten the short end of the stick as government agencies focused on what they considered to be the bigger picture — cleanup of the site itself, restoration of the overall economy, returning some sense of normalcy," said Eric A. Goldstein, a senior lawyer with the group.

Officials at the Environmental Protection Agency and the New York City Department of Health both say that no new data has emerged suggesting they were wrong in concluding that the air downtown

presented little long-term health risk to the general public. But the agency has also not expanded its testing program to include indoor spaces, leaving it mostly to building owners and managers — some of whom might have an interest in minimizing the risk, or have limited resources to clean what they find.

"We had hard facts to support the claims we were making; it wasn't that everyone was saying, 'Don't worry, be happy,' " said Jane M. Kenny, the regional administrator at the E.P.A.'s office in New York. But people wanted certainty, and science, she said, could not provide that and never has.

They acknowledge that there was, at times, an imperfect fit between the issues they study — dire health threats — and the frightening, if short-term, symptoms of respiratory distress and irritation that many people experienced.

At a federal government laboratory in North Carolina, a hundred mice are breathing dust from the trade center collapse. Some have it injected deep into their lungs, while others get intense one-day exposures in a dust-filled chamber, to mimic the dense cloud that people were caught in on Sept. 11. Other researchers are re-examining the health effects of exposure to large dust particles, which have been linked by physicians to the onset of asthma among some people who worked at ground zero in the days after the disaster.

The goal is to learn by comparison. Dust from the trade center is new in the world, a combination of pulverized concrete, steel and other compounds that might have some things in common with a cloud like the one from the volcanic eruption of Mount St. Helens, which has been extensively studied.

In other ways, the dust is perhaps more like industrial pollution that results from combustion, about which much is known as well, said Dr. William H. Farland, the acting deputy assistant administrator for science, at the E.P.A.'s office of research and development.

Dr. Levin at Mount Sinai said that he thinks the truth about the disaster has gotten lost amid what he said has been hyperbole from different sides. Sometimes, Dr. Levin said, otherwise perfectly healthy people can develop problems like asthma with even brief exposures to highly irritating or noxious particles or chemicals, while others, exposed to exactly the same thing, remain perfectly fine. Biological diversity in human populations is much greater than government officials suggested.

"The blanket reassurances that were given after the disaster don't fit our clinical experience," he said.

▼Decisions, Decisions

Some people have grown impatient with what they described as a sort of hand- wringing about the risks downtown.

"Life carries on, you just have to get on with it," said Rose De Klerk, who cleaned up the layer of trade center dust that blew into her apartment, and was eager to get her daughter, Madison, 7, back into a school in the neighborhood. Madison was a second grader at Public School 89, which is scheduled to reopen later this month.

"We have to get back to normal," Ms. De Klerk said.

Other people say they feel paralyzed by the lack of information. Ms. Hennessy, who moved back downtown in January with her husband and their 1-year-old son, Sam, after four months living in a cramped temporary apartment uptown, said that going through her family's things has become an exercise in exorcising risk.

"There are too many questions about each object," she said. "So, I look at and I stare at and I end up throwing it away."

At Stuyvesant High School, a few blocks from the site, questions of indoor air quality have divided children and parents.

Dr. Fernando Pacifico, who lives in Queens, said he considered taking his 17- year-old daughter out of the school last fall, after he treated her for respiratory problems that he believes were caused by the dust and smoke. But that would have ripped apart his family.

"My daughter would be very unhappy leaving, and I couldn't do it," he said. "But then I felt guilty for not doing it, so I'm caught in this quandary, removing her for health reasons or keeping her in because she loves the school."

Dr. Pacifico said he was probably courting a family fight for even talking to a reporter about his concerns — which are focused lately on dozens of idling diesel trucks that take loads of debris to a barge a few hundred feet from the school daily.

"My daughter downplays the air quality issue because she wants to stay," he said. "She doesn't want to hear about it."

Senator Charles E. Schumer also chose to allow his daughter Jessica, 17, to return to Stuyvesant to complete her senior year. He said in an interview that he thought the tests conducted at the school have shown it to be safe, though he said he understood how other people could

reach a different conclusion. "The health of your child is the No. 1 thing you care about, so we try to be very careful and read all the materials, but at the same time try not to allow unsubstantiated fear to overcome the actual facts," he said.

Mr. Schumer said that, like Dr. Pacifico's daughter, Jessica largely dismissed the environmental concerns at the school as issues that only older people would worry about. But the senator said that he and his wife, Iris Weinshall, the commissioner of the New York City Department of Transportation, also had to think about how, as public officials, their decision might be perceived and interpreted. In this case, the decision, based on Jessica's health, became a testament to their faith in downtown, one that he brings up in talking to residents.

"I figure if you do the right thing for her you're doing the right thing for the public," Mr. Schumer said.

Other people denied that they have made any decisions whatsoever, and say that all the talk about risks is mostly a creation of the news media.

"I never had any decisions to make," said Elli Fordyce, an actress and singer, who moved back into her apartment on Rector Place in late September. As for the dust from the trade center that was in her apartment, she said, "My housekeeper came in four or five hours and then my landlord, who has insurance, had guys who don't do any better but charge \$2,500 to come in."

In some buildings, even when to open a window has become a decision. Armando Buria, who lives in a building on West Street — where many tenants are on a rent strike over environmental issues and rents — said that while the air is definitely cleaner now than it was a few months ago, he still does not want to be exposed to it. Only when the wind is from the sea, or New Jersey, will he open his window.

"I'm a database consultant," he said. "I need to keep everything real time and fact based and I don't have the information."

Ryan Conklin, on the other hand, is exulting in the choice he made — a new apartment downtown, better than the one he was renting farther north in Greenwich Village, and less expensive, too.

"I'm one of the takers," he said.

But Mr. Conklin, 26, an investment banking analyst who is single, is also hedging his bets on downtown's future. His new landlord did offer three- to five-year leases, but Mr. Conklin chose the one-year option. Too much about downtown and its environmental issues, he said, could still change.

"You don't want to be trapped here for too long — you never know, especially nowadays," he said.

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